Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church
Yearning
December 7, 2014
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Silence in us any voice but your own, O God, because there are a lot of voices clamoring at us. In the Advent season of waiting, give us moments of quiet in which we might hear you, might hear, among all the seasonal noise, the singing of angels, the miracle of your love come among us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

> Oh! You better watch out,
> You better not cry,
> You better not pout,
> I'm telling you why:
> Santa Claus is coming to town.

It is the season of impatient, hopeful waiting. To be a child in December is to know the most exquisite kind of waiting, impatient, hopeful waiting. Something big is about to happen. When you look around you can see it beginning. It isn't here yet, but it will be soon.

A child's December impatient waiting in hope is a perfect metaphor for the great theological paradoxes: "already but not yet: The Kingdom of God has come, but it is also coming. The world has been redeemed, but it is not yet what it will be one day. Christ has come to save us: Christ will come again."

In the meantime Christmas is all around us and has been here for weeks. I live in downtown Chicago, one block from Michigan Avenue, the "Miracle Mile," and Christmas has been coming since mid-October. The stores are brightly lit and decorated with politically correct elves and snowflakes; holiday music is everywhere including the street corner musicians. One trombone player has been playing "Winter Wonderland" non-stop, morning to night, for weeks. There are sales and bargains and the economy now is in full-throttle over-drive. There are so many shoppers on the sidewalk that you take your life in your hands just walking to the mailbox.

And in the middle of all that, the church slows down, puts on the brakes and becomes somber and solemn. It's Advent, an intentionally quiet time of pondering, watching and waiting for something to happen. The preacher and music director field the perennial complaint: "Why do we have to sing those sad hymns in a minor key, about mourning a lonely exile?" Why can't we sing carols like everybody else?" The only answer to which is, "We will, we will, but it isn't time yet. We have to get ready, be patient. It will happen, but it hasn't happened yet."

To observe Advent; to keep a good Advent, is to wait, impatiently, but with hope. It is to experience a bit of childhood's exquisite, impatient waiting. In

fact, waiting is a major theme in the Bible. It's anything but passive waiting. It's impatient, urgent. It's a kind of yearning, actually.

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down
so that the mountains would quake at your presence,
to make your name known to your adversaries."

It's a prayer – a 2,500 year-old prayer – and a favorite Advent text. Every time I read it, I think in gratitude about a dear friend of mine, Walter Bowman, a Lutheran theologian who died too soon but was full of life and energy and laughter until the day he died. Walt used to say that his very favorite book of theology was not one of the imposing, multi-volume masterworks of Systematic Theology, but a modest little volume, Children's Letters to God. "You can find every major theological issue, every major theological question, somewhere in those letters," Walt said. For instance:

> Dear God,
> Are you really invisible or is that just a trick?
> Lucy
>
> Dear God,
> Thank you for the baby brother, but what I prayed for was a puppy.
> Joyce
>
> Dear God,
> Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other if they had their own rooms. It works with my brother.
> Larry
>
> Dear God,
> Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?
> Jane

And Walt's favorite: a true Advent prayer if there ever was one:

> Dear God,
> Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you better do something quick.
> Love,
> Harriet Anne

Harriet Anne knows exactly how the prophet Isaiah felt and what he meant. "O that you would tear open the heavens and comedown to make your name known to your adversaries."

The armies of the Babylonian Empire have crushed Israel, and in a strategy designed to end the nation, once and for all, have lined up and marched

across the desert, to Babylon itself, all the leading citizens: all the politicians, business people, artisans and artists, clergy and musicians. They will be held captive for several generations – in Babylonian Exile. But then an amazing thing happens. The Persian Empire defeats Babylon, and the first thing the Persian leader, Cyrus, does is to send the Jewish exiles home, back across the desert. They have been waiting for this moment for seventy years, three generations. They've been telling stories about home to their children, reciting poems, singing songs about Jerusalem – their beautiful city, its strong walls, the turrets, the gleaming buildings, the Temple built by Solomon himself. But when they arrive after the long trek across the desert, what they see is utter desolation. The walls have been knocked down, the beautiful buildings burned to the ground, and the Temple, the heart and soul of the people – is lying in ruins. They should have known but they didn't. It must have been like those heartbreaking pictures of families returning to their homes after a hurricane, or a fire or a flood, sifting through the ashes for any scrap of their belongings, a picture, a book, a broken dish – anything to remind them of who they were and who they are.

It is at this moment that one of their poets, a prophet, writes, "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down to make your name known."

"Are you real? Some people don't believe it. You better do something quick."

It is the oldest prayer in human history, prayer at every occasion of tragedy, every occasion of innocent suffering. It is a prayer I suspect every one of us has prayed at one time or another. "If you are good and kind and gracious, O God, why did you let this happen? Why does evil still haunt us – Auschwitz, Darfur, 9/11, ISIS? Why are bombs still killing children? Why don't you do something – tear open the heavens and come down?

Nicholas Wolterstorff, who taught philosophy at Yale, lost his twenty-five year old son, Eric, in a mountain-climbing accident and wrote, in a wonderful book, Lament For a Son: "To the most agonized question I have ever asked, I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall."

We yearn for answers. We yearn to know that god is there: that god knows we are here. We yearn to know that god cares. And it is not only in the midst of tragedy and grief.

Sophy Burnham, a successful author, essayist and freelance journalist writes: "I was happy and yet there was something deeply missing. It was a deep longing that couldn't be satisfied. I have everything. I have a loving husband, a house, children, a career. Why am I yearning for something else? I didn't know what I was yearning for." [Barbara Bradley Hagerty, Fingerprints of God]

She was, of course, yearning for the same thing Isaiah, the returning exiles, the philosophy professor, Harriet Anne, and you and I yearn for: for God; the same ancient yearning for God to do something, to tear open the heavens and come down.

And then, Isaiah's prayer takes a surprising turn, a change in tone, a new idea about God, and how God does come to the world and works in the world, how God relates to us. Did you hear it? After pleading with God to do something; after whining that God is absent and unaccounted for, after almost accusing God for not coming down and making things right, the prayer makes a startling affirmation, a new idea, a new confession of faith:

> "Yet Lord, you are our father,
> We are the clay and you our potter:
> We are the work of your hand."

That is an absolutely new and unique idea of God and how God works: Father-Mother-Parent, Potter. Not a violent face that tears open the heavens and comes down, intervenes forcefully in our affairs to eradicate evil, bring down cruel tyrants and establish justice. That's the god we want. But here, a new idea, a profound, provocative idea: God as an artist, a potter, God as – of all things – a parent.

I know a little bit about being a parent and I know from experience, which is to say, from mistakes, that love works a lot better than coercion. I have seen, over and over, how my inclination to force behavioral outcomes doesn't work ultimately. And how steady, gentle, loving persuasion does. I know enough about being a parent to know that there are limits to my own authority, that you cannot, finally, protect your child from all risk, all danger, all harm. That the final act of love is not to hold tightly and coerce, but to let go, to give the gift of freedom and autonomy and self-determination with all the riskiness it entails, and then to be there come what may.

I am certainly not an artist, but I have watched a potter at work enough to know that it is not about force and coercion but gentle persuasion. As the shapeless lump of clay whirls on the wheel, the potter gently applies pressure with a finger and a shape slowly emerges.

That, remarkably, the e ancient prophet said, is exactly who God is and how God works in the world and in individual lives: not coercively but gently, not in forceful contact, but in gentle love.

I thought about God working quietly in the world last week when someone sent me a newspaper photograph from a demonstration in Portland, Oregon, like hundreds of others across the country, protesting what happened and then did not happen in Ferguson, Missouri. Thinking about, lamenting the wide disparity between how police and the whole judicial

system operates for white people and African American citizens, the wider and tragic disparity between how whit people and African American people perceive the police and courts, and wondering if we will ever overcome the evil of racism – someone sent a picture a photographer took at a protest demonstration. The picture is of a police officer, white, 21-year veteran, police e sergeant Bret Barnes, in full riot gear, with his arms around a 12-year-old African American boy, Devonte Hart, with tears streaming down his cheeks.

It is not going to resolve the problem of racism, but Isaiah the prophet suggests that it is the way evil will be overcome ultimately.

We believe that god did act, that God did come down, not in a violent tearing of the heavens, but in the gentlest, quietest way – the birth of a child. God will come, we believe, not a military conqueror, destroying enemies and putting things right, but in an infant who will grow into a strong but gentle young man who taught the most astonishing things: that its is better to forgive than exact revenge, that its is happier to give then to receive, that it is far better to love than to hate: astonishing ideas which we believe are realities: that peacemakers are blessed, that the meek and merciful are God's favored ones, that the very best, brightest thing any of us can do with our lives is to give them away for his sake. And – the greatest surprise of all – that real strength, real power, is not in muscular , but, of al things, vulnerable love that will suffer: that there is real power in weakness. He will, himself, do the most remarkable, amazing things; will go to the cross to seal it, make the point and to save your soul and mine.

O that you would tear open the heavens and come down…

Dear God, you better do something quick.

God has. We watch and wait for the birth of a child, a newborn – who is God with us, Word made flesh, the love of God is a and a life lived in the world, a love that will experience everything it means to be human. And here's the thing – it's a love that will come into your life and mine in quiet, undramatic ways, ways you could miss if you are not waiting and watching. It's a holy love that appears in a baby and then a life that will suffer and die our death and then overcome death – to show us and anyone who wills e and listen – that the love of God is the most powerful force in the world, a love from which nothing will ever separate us, a love that is God's own response to our deepest yearning: Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, All praise to him.